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Creative Lives:

Dismantling Ageism in the Professional Art World

Insights from online symposia involving
University of Sheffield researchers and
older artists from around the UK.



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Background

Age discrimination in the UK is an important yet largely overlooked issue that urgently needs addressing. As a recent APPG (All-Parliamentary Group) for Ageing and Older People [2019] report indicates: 'Older people frequently experience discriminatory treatment that can dramatically affect their wellbeing, confidence, job prospects, financial and quality of life'. Ageism manifests in all aspects of society, including housing, health care and employment. As the Women & Equalities Committee report Older People and Employment puts it: 'ageism remains a significant problem within British society and is affecting the ability of people to continuing working into later life'. Statistics show that 36% of over 50s claim to have been disadvantaged at work because of their age, and 29% do not think their workplace values older people (Age UK 2018; Centre for Ageing Better 2018). Over a million people in the UK over the age of 50 would like to work but are unable to do so because of age discrimination (Women & Equalities Committee 2018). This is a particularly pressing problem given current government predictions that 50% of all adults in the UK will be over 50 years of age by the mid-2030s (Ibid 2018).

This problem is felt acutely by those navigating an intersection of discriminatory systems. For example, Ageing Equal (2018) notes 'when it comes to employment, older people typically face difficulties in finding a job...but the situation is particularly difficult for older people of colour and the Roma population'. And Catalyst (2019) argues that 'ageism hits women earlier and harder', as 'older women face marginalisation based on "lookism" or gendered youthful beauty standards in addition to the unfounded societal biases that older employees are less innovative, adaptive and generally less qualified'. Coupled with ableism and classism, which disproportionately impact older people, it is clear that ageism in employment is a 'multidimensional and intersectional' issue (World Economic Forum 2020).

Ageism and intersecting systems of discrimination pervade the arts industry. As the following report shows, from negative attitudes and stereotypes perpetuated by media, curators, funders, art schools and organisations, to age barriers on calls for work, to the inaccessibility of networks, to the failure of commissions to accommodate other life commitments, older artists are discriminated against at every turn. COVID-19 and government responses to it have exacerbated ageism in the UK (World Economic Forum 2020). The pandemic has also hit the UK arts and entertainment sector particularly hard. This sector 'has been one of the areas worst affected by the coronavirus pandemic. The decline in revenues and the number of workers furloughed over the past few months is second only to the accommodation and food sector' (Lords Library 2020). This is an alarming combination of factors facing older artists in the creative professions and requires a comprehensive response in return.

It is for this reason that the Creative Lives network brought together a range of researchers, arts organisations and older artists to share their insights on ageism. The report that follows is a culmination of conversations that took place across two symposia in 2020. It outlines the legal context of ageism in the UK, summarises the key issues identified by the Creative Lives network and presents some recommendations for implementing substantial, long-term changes that positively transform the creative professions and ultimately older people's lives.



Briefing Note

The problem of age discrimination is addressed by the legal protections against discrimination found in the Equality Act 2010, with age explicitly included as a protected characteristic under section 5. Protections against age discrimination here apply in two main contexts: discrimination in the provisions of services, and discrimination in the employment sphere.

Focusing on the employment context, employers are not permitted to discriminate against employees, apprentices, or individuals who they “contract personally to do work”. Forms of discrimination include: direct discrimination, indirect discrimination and harassment. Discrimination is prohibited by employers in respect of, deciding whom to offer employment; the terms of employment; access to opportunities or other benefits in the course of employment; the termination of employment; or by subjecting the worker to any other detriment. Discrimination is also prohibited by trade unions or any other organisations of professional artists, as well as organisations who provide vocational training or supply employers with individuals who perform work (i.e. employment agencies).

These protections capture a range of situations that are relevant to artists. For example, they mean that galleries or agents must not discriminate on grounds of age when offering their services to artists. Similarly, organisations offering vocational training or employment opportunities, such as artist in resident schemes, also cannot discriminate on grounds of age. If any employer or service provider engages in one of the prohibit forms of discrimination, they will have enacted unlawfully. The victim of discrimination can then sue under the Equality Act 2010 and be awarded compensation, including for injury to feelings.

There are some clear weaknesses within existing legal protections against age discrimination. Whilst the Equality Act 2010 provides protection across the entirety of the working relationship, it only does so for individuals who come within the specific definition of “employment” adopted by the Act. This presents a clear problem for working artists who fall outside the legal definition. Furthermore, age discrimination is treated differently from other protected characteristics in that the law allows for the justification of direct discrimination. This might be thought to reflect a view or assumption that a person’s age may be justified in circumstances that would not be permissible with other characteristics.

The Equality Act 2010 also does not currently address intersectional discrimination (i.e. when an individual is discriminated against as a result of having more than one protected characteristic). Notably section 14 of the Act would allow claims of discrimination on multiple grounds, but the section has not been brought into effect. The lack of attention paid to intersectionality in the Act precludes any consideration of how the different axis of oppression relates to each other and put people in specific positions of vulnerability and exclusion.

Dr Joe Atkinson & Isabel Carrascal, University of Sheffield. (For the full version of this briefing note on Ageism and the Equality Act 2010, please email: creativelivessheff@gmail.com.)

Key Issues

1. EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS

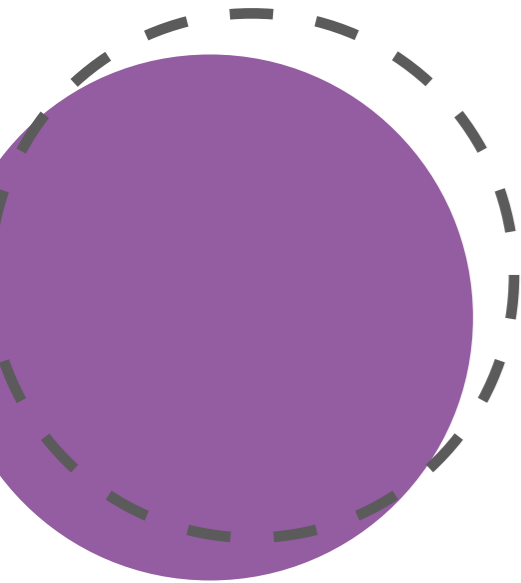
One recurring issue discussed at the two symposia was the impact external perception had on the opportunities afforded to older artists. The media was identified as a key culprit, with its perpetuation of a “desired look”, an “optics”, which enforced ageism due to its “fetishization” of youth. A related issue was unconscious bias, with participants noting the way “pervasive societal norms” determine discriminatory attitudes towards older artists. This was said to inform the perceptions and behaviours of potential collaborators (especially younger artists), commissioners, organisations, funders and other gatekeepers.

“There is a desired look (promoted) by media – most evident in arts such as the fashion industry which discriminates against age from a physical appearance but also evident and reinforced across most arts.”

2. SELF-CONFIDENCE

A lack of self-confidence also emerged as a significant issue. This was seen to be particularly problematic because of the need for older artists to display “extra confidence” in order to “excite curators and commissioners if you are not going to be seen as a glamorous young thing”. Self-confidence issues were said to arise amongst the older artists because of consistently receiving knock-backs as a direct result of their age. However, it was also noted that low self-confidence was the result of other, intersecting forms of discrimination such as classism, racism and sexism.

“If you’ve experienced any kind of oppression it’s hard not to internalise it (as) self-doubt, imposter syndrome (and) lack of confidence.”



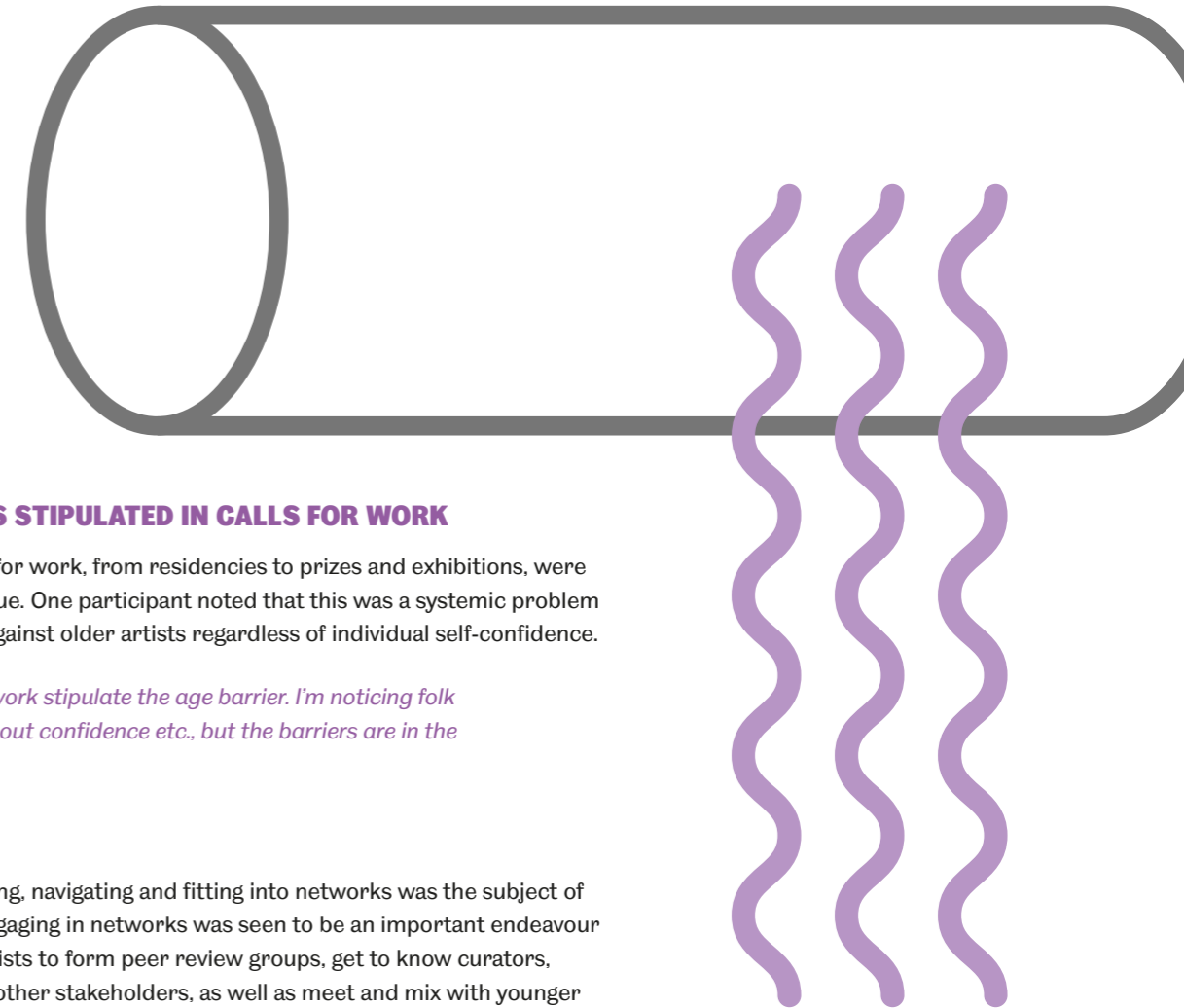
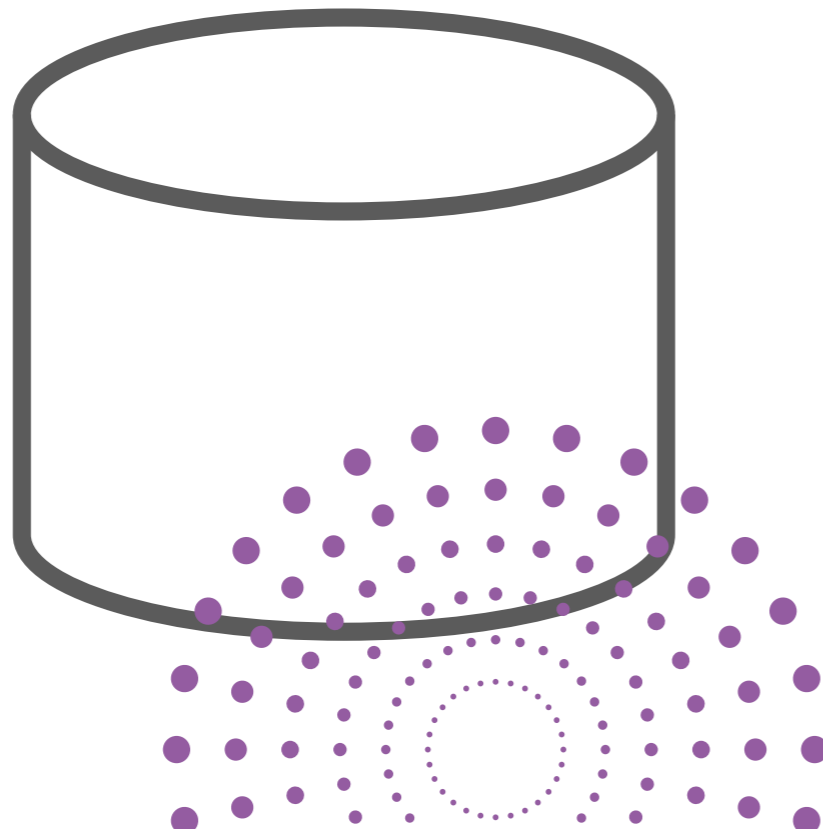
3. INTERSECTIONAL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION

Intersectional forms of discrimination were seen to be a major issue. Sexuality, social status, disability issues, race, class, and gender were all discussed in this area. In regard to race, participants noted how Black and other artists from racially marginalised backgrounds are expected to produce a certain type of art (typically involving themes of pain and trauma) in order to receive funding. With sexism, participants highlighted how older women are considered incapable of producing noteworthy art and are only deemed suitable for childcare, mentoring the young and being part of an audience. It was also agreed that a person's class position often determined whether they turned to art later in life. For some, there was a need to secure a stable living before focusing on developing art as a professional practice, which meant they may have missed out on opportunities reserved for younger artists.

"The more time you spend on the planet, the more racism (you endure), the more this exhausts you and affects your self-confidence and belief in yourself as an artist."

4. OTHER LIFE COMMITMENTS

The need to attend to other life commitments, as well as the failure of curators, residencies, and organisations to acknowledge and accommodate these commitments, were cited as another problem. The difficulty of focusing exclusively on artistic practice, travelling to show nationally and internationally, working for free, and taking up long-term residencies because of care and other responsibilities were all mentioned as considerable obstacles older artists have to navigate.



5. AGE BARRIERS STIPULATED IN CALLS FOR WORK

Age barriers in calls for work, from residencies to prizes and exhibitions, were felt to be a major issue. One participant noted that this was a systemic problem that discriminated against older artists regardless of individual self-confidence.

"The calls for work stipulate the age barrier. I'm noticing folk are talking about confidence etc., but the barriers are in the actual ads."

6. NETWORKS

The difficulty of finding, navigating and fitting into networks was the subject of much discussion. Engaging in networks was seen to be an important endeavour because it allows artists to form peer review groups, get to know curators, commissioners and other stakeholders, as well as meet and mix with younger artists. However, previously mentioned issues such as external perception and lack of self-confidence means that these opportunities are harder to come by for older artists.

"Older artist often aren't part of an artist peer group, especially if they've been out of the game for a while, e.g. doing other work or caring. They often talk about a lack of confidence/encouragement and critical feedback – this makes a huge difference."

7. GATEKEEPERS

All these issues explored above were felt to be compounded by the fact gatekeepers (curators, funders, art schools, universities etc.) ignore the valuable skills and experiences of older artists, whilst making uninformed decisions – based on perception – that detrimentally impact the opportunities available to these artists.

Recommendations

The knowledge gathered during the two Creative Lives symposia highlighted five key areas of concern that require immediate action. We invite educational institutions, arts organisations, policy makers, to actively engage with these recommendations and help dismantle ageism in the creative professions by aligning their policies and practices with them. We will implement our Creative Lives badges as recognition of their efforts.

1. FUNDING.

- a) All funders should commit to having no age stipulation in their funding calls.
- b) All funders should produce calls that encourage intergenerational collaboration; as well as engagement with artists from all marginalised communities.



2. POLICY.

- a) All institutions should establish and publicise strong and visible policies on ageism, making them easily accessible on their online platforms.
- b) MPs, policy makers and legal experts should seek to redress current weaknesses in the protections offered by the The Equality Act 2010.



3. EDUCATION.

- a) All educational institutions should support true age diversity in their student bodies, and avoid the reiteration of age related stereotypes in connection to all educational programmes (including Widening Participation, Foundation Routes and Lifelong learning).
- b) Funders and arts organisations should seek to create training programmes, workshops and other educational opportunities to enhance understanding of ageism and other intersecting forms of discrimination within their institutions.



4. INFRASTRUCTURE.

- a) All institutions should commit to establishing an internal ageism board or clearly integrate ageism within existing Equality, Diversity and Inclusion boards in order to dismantle ageist policies and practices.
- b) Funders and arts organisations should accommodate parenting and other caring responsibilities.

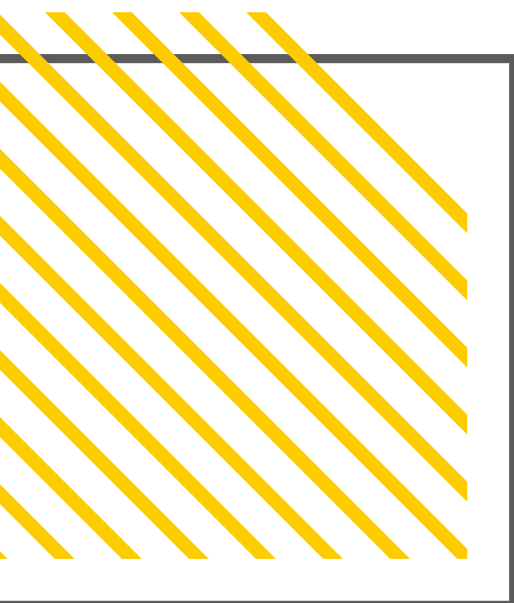


5. PROGRAMMES.

- a) Arts organisations and institutions should encourage and support artists of all ages to engage in a variety of intergenerational collaborations, with a clear focus on meaningful creative content and outputs; and creating frameworks that encourage an equitable sharing of resources.
- b) Arts organisations should acknowledge that older artists need opportunities to learn and develop and have the capacity to do so.



As a final note, we strongly recommend that artists of all ages actively engage with the relevant professional unions, campaigns on social media, and networks like Creative Lives to ensure that we can, as a collective, dismantle ageism in the creative professions and cultivate an industry that provides equal opportunities for all.



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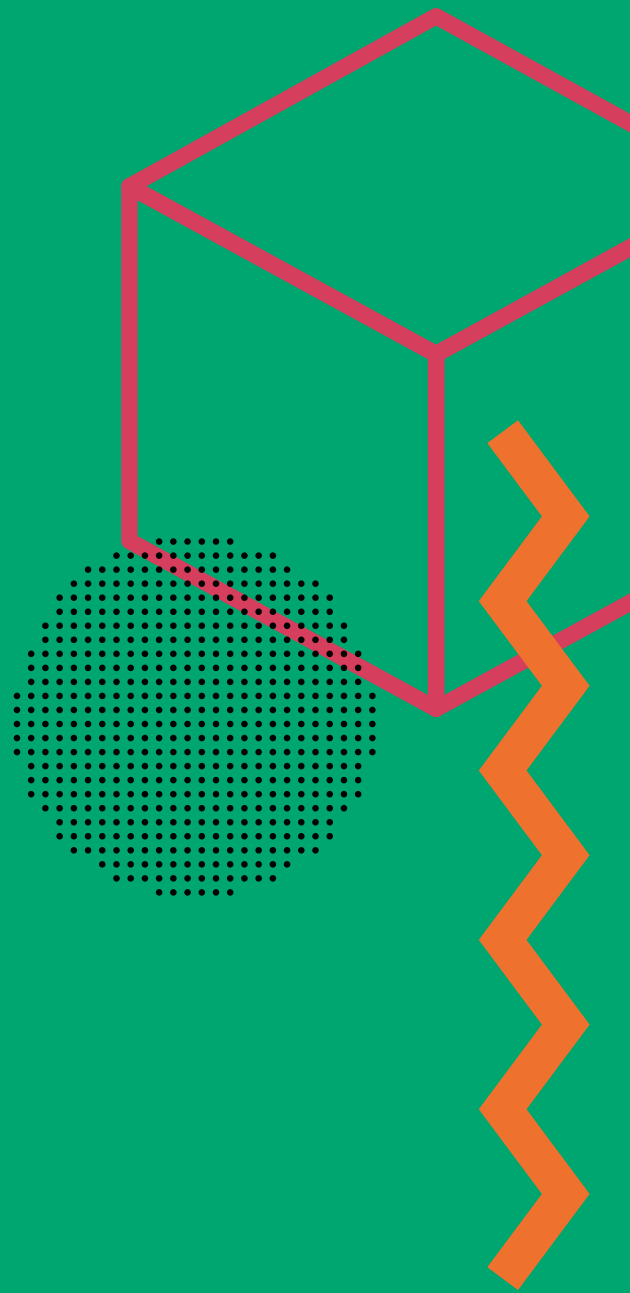
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